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ABSTRACT

The rhetoric surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy offers a unique testing ground for theories about the construction of knowledge in society. One dilemma, however, is the lack of academic theorizing about the assassination. The Kennedy assassination has been left almost exclusively in the hands of "nonhistorians," i.e., politicians, filmmakers, and novelists. Their struggle to reach consensus is an opportunity to consider recent issues in rhetorical theory, issues of knowledge and belief, argument and narrative, history and myth. In "Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured," Susan C. Jarratt uses the sophists and their focus on "nomos" to propose "an alternative analytic to the mythos/logos antithesis" characteristic of more Aristotelian forms of rhetorical analysis. Two basic features of sophistic historiography interest Jarratt: (1) the use of narrative structures along with or opposed to argumentative structures; and (2) the rhetorical focus on history to creative broad cultural meaning in the present rather than irrefutable fact about the past. Jarratt's book lends itself to a 2-part reading of Jim Garrison's "On the Trail of the Assassins"--a rational or Aristotelian reading and a nomos-driven or myth-making reading. Garrison's first chapters are almost completely devoted to the appeal of ethos--his portrayal of himself as a loyal American--but the bulk of the book presents evidence that Garrison collected in the 1960s. Still, its persuasive power comes also from its narrative form, its story of Garrison's 8-year investigation of the assassination. (Contains 23 references.) (TB)

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SOPHISTIC SYNTHESIS IN JFK ASSASSINATION RHETORIC

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The rhetoric surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy offers a unique testing ground for theories about the construction of knowledge in society. Here we have a momentous historical event—the murder of a U.S. president—which after thirty years continues to inspire debate and controversy. With twenty-six volumes of 1964 Warren Commission findings, twelve volumes of 1979 House of Representatives findings, hundreds of books and articles published on the subject, and dozens of films and documentaries produced during these thirty years, we have countless of details about the case. Yet only the most basic conclusions are universally accepted: we have a shooting, a dead president, another shooting, a dead police officer, a suspect, another shooting, a dead suspect, and finally the suspect's confessed killer. Beyond these basic conclusions, we have many versions of the assassination but no single version of what "really" happened.

Unlike other major historical events, the Kennedy assassination has been left almost exclusively in the hands of nonhistorians—politicians, columnists, reporters, filmmakers, novelists, and a collection of "assassination reseachers" who have produced hundreds of books and articles about the events surrounding November 22, 1963. Their continuing struggle to reach consensus about the assassination offers us a dramatic—and important—opportunity to consider some key issues in recent rhetorical theory, in particular the issues of knowledge and belief, argument and narrative, and history and myth, and how those issues connect with the political realities of late 20th-century America. My own examination of the rhetoric surrounding the Kennedy assassination leads me to conclude that current "sophistic" theories of rhetoric offer the most effective models for analyzing and understanding JFK assassination theories and, more generally, the histories we Americans are currently creating for ourselves.

After surveying the rhetorical landscape of JFK assassination discourse, I'll use the sophistic lens suggested by Susan C. Jarratt in *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric*

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Refigured to examine Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, a bestselling book that was the basis for the Oliver Stone film *JFK*. Garrison's book, I will argue, represents the kind of synthesis of argument, narrative, history, and myth that Jarratt's rereading of sophistic rhetoric calls for and validates. Garrison's book has not had the final word on the assassination—from a sophistic perspective it's doubtful that any single book or theory ever will—but it has become perhaps the best-known of the many conspiracy theories. Indeed, as a narrative reconstruction of Garrison's attempt to solve the Kennedy murder case, it is different from most other conspiracy theories. It's a synthesis of argument and narrative, and as such the book suggests the form and style that successful assassination theories—and perhaps successful histories in general—will most likely follow in this culture in the near future. Judged in Aristotelian terms, the book is perhaps not as rigorous or plausible as several other assassination theories; judged in sophistic terms, however, it stands out as the most successful of the dozens of published theories.

WHAT WE "KNOW" ABOUT THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

Why are people still writing about the Kennedy assassination? We might reasonably assume that professional historians have by now sifted through the evidence and established beyond a reasonable doubt who killed Kennedy—and how and why. But this is not the case; indeed, as several historians have themselves pointed out, academic historians have been nearly silent on the Kennedy assassination (Kurtz, "Assassination" 1; Kurtz, *Crime* ix; Lesar 469; Wrone 332).

One historian who *has* written extensively on the assassination, Michael L. Kurtz, has received little support from his peers. Critics—even those who share his belief in a conspiracy—question everything from his accuracy and his use of sources to the degree of his speculation and his overall conclusions. David R. Wrone, for example, points out that Kurtz relies too much on Warren Commission documents. According to Wrone, Kurtz "accepts many key documents with little question" (332). Wrone also accuses Kurtz of breaking "the cardinal rule of history never to speculate but to remain faithful to evidence even if it leaves perpetual blanks in the

narrative" (333). These and other criticisms point to two key dilemmas facing all assassination researchers in their quest for "knowledge" about the case: they are attempting to construct a credible reality based on a vast yet clearly incomplete world of evidence, so any reconstruction that remains "faithful to evidence" will surely include unsatisfying "blanks" that may threaten the overall plausibility of the whole; and they are basing their reconstructions on official documents, eyewitness testimonies, and photographic records that have in one way or another been filtered through the government *and* questioned by one critic or another over the course of three decades, so virtually any "theory" that draws on some records while ignoring or discounting others stands subject to a wide range of questions and criticisms.

The first dilemma may explain the lack of academic theorizing about the assassination. There are plenty of records about the assassination, but the amount of "admissable evidence" is open to debate. In academic terms, nothing in the twenty-six Warren Commission volumes and 360 cubic feet of related records or the twelve House volumes and 400 cubic feet of related records can be accepted uncritically. And because of well-publicized hints of government involvement in the assassination or in some kind of post-assassination cover-up, many critical readers find it difficult to accept *any* assassination records that have passed through government filters. Indeed, Wrone insists very plainly in *The Journal of Southern History* that even the most basic facts of the case remain elusive to those looking for legal or academic certainty: "No credible evidence connects any group or individual, including Oswald, to the murder" (333). Without a body of generally accepted evidence to draw upon, historians find it difficult to put together anything but a patchy picture indeed of the assassination.

The second dilemma is equally silencing. Everyone involved in moving beyond the paucity of generally accepted evidence and theorizing about the Kennedy assassination must accept some data while discounting other data; this is necessarily the case, just as it is necessarily the case in all theorizing, all historicizing, all arguing. Yet academic reviewers criticize Kurtz for being selective about accepting *and* omitting certain evidence from the Warren Commission and House Select Committee investigations (Garrow 304; Lesar 469). Both inside and outside of

academia, most theories about the assassination are met with charges of faulty selection of evidence. As I've mentioned, almost no evidence in the case can be viewed with any degree of certainty. Those who argue against a conspiracy select a certain subset of evidence and interpret it in a particular way; those who argue for a conspiracy select a different subset of evidence and interpret it in a particular way. Both sides are, in their way, dealing with "probable truth," but the probability of their truths is dependent on that very unscientific process of selection. Because every theorist is by necessity selecting only a very small subset of possible records on which to base his or her theory, every theorist is open to easy criticism: "Your theory merely matches the evidence you've deliberately chosen to consider. Now, if you consider *this* document...." The reasoning almost inevitably becomes circular.

Not too surprisingly, the majority of conspiracy theories are in fact not *positive* theories at all—arguments drawing on specific records to build a full and coherent theory—but criticisms of the official theory put forth by the Warren Commission in 1964. Some of the major, best-selling conspiracy books—Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment*, Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories After the Fact*, and Anthony Summers' *Conspiracy*, for example—are little more than critiques of the official version. The writers admit quite openly that there isn't enough evidence to put together any kind of positive theory; their argument is simply that the one positive theory put forth by the government is wrong. Most such conspiracists end their volumes by calling on the government to declassify the records and even to reopen the investigation so that an alternative theory might be constructed. When writers *do* put forth a positive theory—as Kurtz the historian does, as David Lifton does in *Best Evidence*, and as Jim Garrison does in *On the Trail of the Assassins*—critics on all sides leap to question and refute evidence and conclusions alike.

Perhaps more historical research would overcome these problems. But to conduct primary research on leads suggested by the Warren Commission and subsequent investigations, including Jim Garrison's, is now next to impossible given the dwindling number of eyewitnesses, the continuing passage of time, and the continuing inaccessibility of certain records related to the assassination (as late as April 1992, 2% of the archived Warren

Commission records and all 400 cubic feet of the archived House records remained classified [McReynolds 384, 387-88]; since then, a good number of selected records have been released, but literally millions of pages remain unavailable [Kurtz, *Crime* lvi]). Plenty of independent information—much of it wildly conflicting—has been uncovered by a variety of private researchers and public agencies in the thirty years since the assassination, but this has simply added to the vast database from which any theory must be constructed. In any event, taking on a project of these proportions would be, as James H. Lesar notes in connection to Kurtz's effort, a "gargantuan task" (469).

These are serious, and silencing, dilemmas for researchers tied in general to what Kathleen E. Welch calls the Heritage School of rhetoric—and in particular to the Aristotelian, "logic-dominant" framework for valid argumentation as presented by rhetoricians in the Heritage School (Welch 53). Despite thirty years' time and an overwhelming amount of potential evidence in the case, academic historians still "know" *nothing* about who killed Kennedy. Their own logic, cautious and even admirable as it is, prevents them from drawing conclusions. As long as assassination theorists and critics subscribe to what Welch calls "exaggerated reason, hyperationalism, and a procedural way of thinking that not only excludes emotion but in fact looks down on it" (37), no JFK assassination theory is likely to generate consensus. Ironically, Kurtz himself offers little hope that historians will ever agree, "even if all the evidence currently withheld by the government were released" ("Assassination" 19). This is why I am convinced that the Kennedy assassination must be treated as a rhetorical, rather than a historical, entity. If any public consensus is to be reached, it will be reached through rhetoric in all its guises, not merely through the Aristotelian version of Heritage School rhetoric.

WHAT WE "BELIEVE" ABOUT THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

As a culture, we *believe* that Kennedy was killed as the result of a conspiracy, and we're becoming more certain of it with every passing decade. In Gallup and CBS/New York Times -

polls conducted over the past thirty years, the American public has consistently demonstrated its belief in a conspiracy:

	1963	**1966**	**1976**	**1983**	**1988**	**1992**
% who believe a lone assassin killed JFK	29	36	11	11	13	10
% who believe there was a conspiracy to kill JFK	52	50	81	74	66	77
% who do not know or who don't have an answer	19	14	8	15	21	13

In the 1992 poll, fully 84% of those under age thirty—those with the least amount of personal knowledge of the assassination, those with the most "rhetorically constructed" beliefs about the assassination—believed in a conspiracy. Notice also that in post-Watergate America the percentage of people who believe the lone-assassin theory has remained fairly stable—near 10%. In every poll since the assassination, at least half of the respondents have supported a conspiracy theory.

We might say, then, that of the two basic camps of *nonacademic* assassination theorists—I'll call them conspiracists and nonconspiracists—the conspiracists have been the more persuasive to the American public. Certainly the conspiracists publish more and sell better than nonconspiracists. I'm aware of sixty full-length assassination theories currently in print; of those, forty-eight or 80% are conspiracy theories. Jim Garrison's book spent fifteen weeks on the *New York Times* paperback bestseller list in 1992, much of it at number one. In January of 1992 *four* different conspiracy theories occupied positions on the *Times'* bestseller lists. This kind of success is not unusual, even more than three decades after the event. Many conspiracy theories have gone through multiple printings.

Despite public opinion, however, it is the nonconspiracists that have enjoyed the solid backing of the mainstream mass media. Indeed, quite a bit of attention in the mainstream media has been given to the very question of *why* so many people believe in a conspiracy. "Lone assassin" theorists typically ridicule conspiracists either as profiteers or paranoids, or both, who

cater to the American public's psychological need for some "meaning" behind the killing of John F. Kennedy. Jim Moore, author of *Conspiracy of One*, dismisses the work of conspiracists as little more than a "quest for public attention and personal gain" (vii). A 1993 *U.S. News and World Report* cover story celebrating the publication of Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*, a nonconspiracy book, ridicules one conspiracy theorist for spending "his adult life trying to unmask the JFK plotters" ("Special" 68), implying that such work is unworthy of adult attention—despite the fact that the majority of Americans are still looking for an answer.

In the introduction to his 1988 reissue of *The Death of a President*, a narrative account that adopts the Warren Commission Report's conclusions, William Manchester attempts to explain why so many people believe in a conspiracy:

> If you put six million dead Jews on one side of a scale and on the other side put the Nazi regime—the greatest gang of criminals ever to seize control of a modern state—you would have a rough balance: greatest crime, greatest criminals. But if you put the murder of the President of the United States on one side of another scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something along Oswald, something weightier. (xix)

Stephen E. Ambrose concurs in *The New York Times Book Review*, admitting that "it's almost unbearable to accept that such a miserable human being as Lee Harvey Oswald could have killed Kennedy all by himself" (24). And again, *U.S. News and World Report*: "Many people want a more formidable set of villains" ("Special" 71). According to these conspiracy-theory critics, Americans believe in a conspiracy because they "want" or "need" to believe in a conspiracy.

Taking a different tack, Ambrose, a historian and biographer of Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon, further speculates that so many people believe in a conspiracy because "so much of world history has been caused by conspiracies" and because "governments lie and cover up so much and so often" (24). This is, of course, exactly the point behind most conspiracy theories, but Ambrose dismisses the well-documented history of U.S. disinformation, covert action at home and abroad, assassination plots in Cuba and elsewhere, illegal wiretapping of its own

citizens, and so on, as good reason *not* to believe in a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy. It's too predictable, he appears to say, too *easy* to believe in a conspiracy. This thinking—the idea that believing in a JFK assassination conspiracy theory is either simple- or weak-minded, something akin to believing that Elvis is still alive—dominates most mainstream "anniversary" discussions of the topic. Ambrose himself casts conspiracy thinking as a cartoonish kind of paranoia. If even parts of the theories are true, he says ironically, "we live in a world ruled by dark, sinister forces. Democracy is an opiate for the masses; a conspiracy of the rich and powerful actually rules" (23). In his view, to believe in a Kennedy assassination conspiracy is to subscribe to a Pynchonesque worldview that readers of *The New York Times* should have grown out of by now.

WORLDVIEWS AND "TRUTH"

Worldviews are indeed at the core of the debate—and here is where the sophistic emphasis on audience and *nomoi*, or cultural codes, comes into play. Nonconspiracists "explain away" conspiracy theories as attempts to exploit the American public's psychological need for order in the world. Conspiracists themselves admit to believing in a world ruled by forces, some sinister, most rich and powerful. Jim Garrison claims that he's "interested in bringing into focus the *forces* involved" (141—his italics). Sylvia Meagher, author of *Accessories After the Fact*, an early critique of the Warren Commission, allies herself with "those who seek meaning in human affairs and do not conceive of history as governed by random, irrational, and incessant coincidence" (268). This quest for larger meaning is in part a quest for narrative coherency; as Hayden White maintains, narrative historical accounts gain authority by endowing reality with form, "thereby mak[ing] it desirable, imposing upon its processes the formal coherency that only stories possess" (19). The fact that conspiracists seek to turn the Kennedy assassination into "story" by positioning it in terms of larger forces is at once the key to their rhetorical success and the main reason for their critical failure in a culture still dominated by an Aristotelian analytical lens. Early assassination accounts—the Warren Report, Jim Bishop's *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*, and Manchester's *The Death of a President*—all recount an essentially nonsensical

assassination, a random event which *disrupted* the altogether different, Arthurian narrative of Kennedy's presidency. Then, as conspiracists such as Mark Lane, Sylvia Meagher, and Jim Garrison began to "make sense" of the assassination, media pundits and politicians attacked them for using evidence selectively, for speculating, for seeing more in the assassination than there actually was, and so on. It wasn't right to *make* sense, or story, where officially there was none. "Framing" the assassination was, to those subscribing to the official version of events, either delusional or irresponsible—certainly *irrational*, and irrationality is one quality a traditional Aristotelian worldview cannot accept.

The criticisms have gone the other way, too. Conspiracists themselves seek to "explain away" the Warren Commission Report as a deliberate political attempt to manipulate the American public. In *Rush to Judgment*, conspiracist Mark Lane states flatly that "[t]he Commission's responsibility to maintain public confidence in the American institutions overshadowed its mandate to secure and report the facts" (368-69). At least two academic historians agree that the Warren Commission had such motives. Michael Kurtz states that "the evidence makes it clear that [the Commission's] primary purpose was to put an end to the rumors and speculations and to convince the American public that no conspiracy existed" ("Assassination" 4). Marcus Raskin claims that the Commission was primarily concerned with "using the language and structure of conservative authority to move the nation from dis-ease to ease about the events of the Kennedy assassination" (487). In general, conspiracists view the Commission's findings as *protective* of its own particular worldview.

The theories—and criticisms—of conspiracists and nonconspiracists suggest the contrasting worldviews that guide their thinking. Conspiracists tend to offer up "structural" analyses of the assassination, suggesting in broad terms that history is the result of deliberate attempts by competing forces to gain or maintain control. Nonconspiracists tend to offer up "instrumental" analyses of the assassination that suggest that history is dominated by individuals—some acting with the force of legitimate power and some seizing power for brief, often terrifying, moments. At stake is more than just the factual "truth" about who killed John F.

Kennedy. At stake is a larger, less fact-based cultural and even mythical "truth" about politics and government. Ultimately, then, perhaps the *most* successful assassination theories will be the ones that can not only argue for an Aristotelian "probable truth," but also appeal to or construct a larger cultural mythology that helps a majority of Americans understand the world they live in. This is the sort of rhetorical feat Susan Jarratt ascribes to sophists Protagoras and Gorgias, and indeed both Protagoras and Gorgias have suffered the kinds of criticisms that modern-day sophists Jim Garrison and Oliver Stone have received. Then as now, critics demanding Aristotelian or "rational" arguments are not pleased when they witness the popular success of sophistic forms of rhetoric.

Jim Garrison manages to appeal to an instrumental worldview in his assassination theory while taking his readers to a structural conclusion. He is more than a simple "arguer," offering in an Aristotelian sense logical, ethical, and emotional appeals in his attempt to persuade us to believe in a conspiracy. He's also a good example of a "sophistic" rhetorician appealing to and making use of *nomos*, or culture-law, to rewrite not only history, but also our own perception of ourselves as a culture. In this way he resembles Jarratt's rhetorician, "reformulating human 'truths' in historically and geographically specific contexts" (42). To understand Garrison's ability to convince so many Americans—through his book and, less directly, through Stone's film based on his book—of the existence of a conspiracy, we need more than a traditional Aristotelian analytical framework.

THE SOPHISTIC APPROACH

In her *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, Jarratt uses the sophists and their focus on *nomos* to propose "an alternative analytic to the *mythos/logos* antithesis" characteristic of more Aristotelian forms of rhetorical analysis (xxiii). Two basic features of sophistic historiography interest Jarratt: first, the use of narrative structures along with or as opposed to argumentative structures; and second, a rhetorical focus on *using* history to create broad cultural meaning in the present as opposed to "establishing irrefutable facts" about the past

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(16). In contrast to Aristotelian discourses, sophistic discourses gain acceptance "less on the basis of logical validity and more on the force of their 'rhetorical,' i.e., persuasive and aesthetic, appeal "(28). Hence the focus on *nomos*: the sophistic focus is on writing (or creating) history *to* (or *for*) a cultural audience as opposed to a more Aristotelian focus on writing (or describing) history *about* the past to a timeless, abstract audience. Jarratt stops short of recommending that historians and rhetoricians abandon "facts" altogether; instead, she proposes a synthetic discourse—a discourse that synthesizes an Aristotelian concern for the logical and factual with a sophistic concern for the mythic and aesthetic (29).

Jarratt offer readings of two sophistic discourses: Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* and Protagoras's "Great Speech" from Plato's *Protagoras*. According to Jarratt, her readings, which I adopt as models for analyzing Jim Garrison's historical discourse, "seek to disentangle the artfully interwoven strands of narrative—the 'mythic' mode of organization—and 'rational' argument, to show a mixed discourse shaped by prose writers fully in control of both forms" (49). In other words, Jarratt recognizes the Aristotelian or "rational" component of historical discourse, but wants to refocus our attention on the sophistic or "mythic narrative" possibilities of historical discourse.

What follows, then, is a two-part reading of Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*. First, I'll discuss it as Aristotelian discourse—as "rational argument" that employs the primary rhetorical appeals of *ethos* and *logos*. Then I'll discuss it as sophistic discourse—as "narrative" and as *nomos*-driven "myth-making."

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ASSASSINS AS ARGUMENT

Given Garrison's career as a lawyer, using Aristotle to analyze his writing seems to make sense. Garrison's job as District Attorney and as author was to try to establish the "probable truth" of Kennedy's assassination. And Garrison works very hard to establish Aristotle's two favorite appeals, *ethos* and *logos*.

Garrison's first two chapters, "The Serenity of Ignorance" and "The Awakening," are almost completely devoted to the appeal of *ethos*. Garrison portrays himself as a trusting and patriotic American. He shares with us the name of his paternal grandfather, "Thomas Jefferson Garrison," and informs us that his maternal grandfather "was a most patriotic man" (7). He recalls that "the important formative years of [his] youth were spent in the military" and that he "flew in combat over the front lines in France and Germany" (8). He cites five years of active service in the Army and eighteen years of part-time service in the National Guard, during which time, he insists, he "never encountered deception of any kind" (9). He mentions his brief employment by the FBI (9). After becoming a lawyer, he tells us, he decided to run for District Attorney not out of any hope of winning, but because he "thought [his] participation in the election might help one of the others who would produce a better office" (9). He sums up his character at the moment of the assassination:

> I was an old-fashioned patriot, a product of my family, my military experience, and my years in the legal profession. I could not imagine then that the government ever would deceive the citizens of this country. (10)

Garrison also portrays himself as a reluctant investigator of the JFK assassination. As District Attorney of the New Orleans parish, Garrison says, he was "immediately drawn into the case" because of Oswald's activities in New Orleans during the summer of 1963 (xi). He says he had no reason to doubt the official version of the assassination, but he simply "was not free to ignore Lee Harvey Oswald's unexplained three months in the city" (4). From the beginning, then, he presents the idea that his investigation was a service to his country, a duty: "This was my jurisdiction as district attorney" (15). And his obligation extends as pressing as ever into the 1980s, when the book was written, due to the failure of both the Warren Commission and the 1979 House Select Committee on Assassinations. "This book," Garrison promises, "accepts the responsibility that the House Committee bypassed" (xiv).

And finally, Garrison portrays himself as a "David" up against the "Goliath" of the US government. "I have always been constitutionally unable to back away from a confrontation," he

admits. "To me, what was happening in my life was a sort of continuation of World War II, except that it was a different kind of combat—and a different enemy" (145). His posturing here, while perhaps forced and transparent, nonetheless is probably his strongest Aristotelian appeal in the book. If we accept these characterizations of himself, and if they appeal to us, we are generally more likely to accept what he has to say.

The bulk of the book, however, is the presentation of the evidence that Garrison and his investigators collected during the 1960s and that he and others uncovered during the 1970s and 80s (much of which was unavailable at the time of his 1967-69 investigation). Ultimately, Garrison claims to believe that the "facts" should speak for themselves. In summary form, here are some of the details that Garrison claims led him (however unwilling he might have been at the outset) to accept the probable existence of a conspiracy:

- while in the Marines, Oswald had inexplicably been given a Russian examination shortly before his brief defection to the Soviet Union
- upon their return to the United States after his defection, Oswald and his wife were courted by Dallas's anticommunist "White Russian" community, including George de Mohrenschildt, an international businessman with suspected CIA connections
- Oswald had stamped "544 Camp Street"—the New Orleans address of Guy Banister, a former FBI agent and strong anticommunist—on his "Fair Play for Cuba" leaflets, suggesting the possibility that Oswald had been used as an *agent provocateur* by right-wing extremists
- several eyewitnesses observed Oswald together with Banister and David Ferrie—another well-known anticommunist with suspected connections to both the CIA and the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba
- several eyewitnesses observed Oswald together with Ferrie and Clay Shaw, an international businessman with suspected connections to the CIA
- five people who worked with or near Oswald at the Reily Coffee Company in New Orleans during the summer of 1963, including the next-door neighbor of Clay Shaw,

ended up working for NASA within a few weeks of Oswald's leaving the company, suggesting some form of government attention to Oswald's movements

- in several instances before the assassination, witnesses observed someone claiming to be Oswald calling attention to himself with odd behavior—trying to defect to Cuba in Mexico City, firing at another person's target at a firing range, test-driving a used car at dangerous speeds, asking a potential employer if the building had a good view of downtown Dallas, even threatening to kill President Kennedy—but in sworn testmony, the same witnesses described people *other* than Oswald as the "Oswald" involved, suggesting that someone was impersonating Oswald in order to portray him as a crazy radical
- five days before the assassination, the New Orleans FBI received a telexed warning that an attempt on Kennedy's life would be made in Dallas, but the FBI didn't pass the warning on to the Secret Service or anyone else
- an eyewitness observed a man she identified as Jack Ruby unloading another man—who was carrying a rifle case—alongside the grassy knoll one hour before the assassination
- several eyewitnesses saw two men—one dark-skinned and balding—in the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository
- several eyewitnesses, including a Dallas police officer, saw three men—one dark-skinned and balding—run out the back entrance of the Depository, jump into a station wagon, then swing by the front of the building and pick up a fourth man (possibly Oswald), then speed off the wrong way on a one-way street
- acting on eyewitness accounts, the Dallas police arrested three men by the railroad tracks behind the grassy knoll, but no record remains of their mug shots, fingerprints, or names
- the pathologist in charge of Kennedy's Bethesda autopsy burned his original notes in the fireplace of his home
- JFK's brain—the key piece of evidence in the murder—was preserved, but mysteriously disappeared.

These details are fairly familiar to assassination buffs. All are based on eyewitness accounts or released documents. None can be called a "smoking gun," however, and even if we accept them as facts, the details are significant for what they *suggest*, not for what they *prove*. There are plenty of alternative explanations and alternative eyewitness accounts for all of these details. Indeed, they have all have been contested in one way or another over the years—most recently (and most persuasively) by nonconspiracist Gerald Posner, but also by conspiracists. Nonetheless, the details represent the core of Garrison's case. In an Aristotelian sense, Garrison's case doesn't seem all that persuasive, based as it is on circumstantial evidence and supposition. Indeed, based on "evidence" alone, Garrison's book is quite similar to dozens of other conspiracy theories. Many more assassination facts and details, some perhaps even more suggestive than the ones above, have been presented by other researchers over the years. But as I discussed earlier, even the longest list of incriminating "evidence" will be subject to refutations and alternative interpretations. Simply put, when it comes to the vast amount of evidence surrounding the Kennedy assassination, the thousands upon thousands of accumulated details that have been publicized and dissected, no single "probable truth" stands out. In the absence of any dramatic new evidence, the traditional argumentative appeal of *logos* is unlikely to get to the bottom of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. After more than thirty years and hundreds of attempted "proofs," no one, including Garrison, has been able to argue persuasively enough to satisfy the thousands of readers and writers who are still looking for an answer to the question, "Who killed JFK?"

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ASSASSINS AS NARRATIVE

"The sophist," Jarratt tells us, "combines narrative with rhetorical argument to make his case" (52). Yet as rhetoricians we have remained focused on Aristotelian techniques of rational argumentation. In both our production and analysis of texts, Jarratt proposes, we should adopt "a heightened attention to narrative structure" (60). She likens the sophistic writer to Frankenstein: "the storyteller/rhetorician stitches together the parts" (60). In *On the Trail of the Assassins*, this

is precisely the role Garrison takes on: he is the stitcher, the narrator. His book is not called "The Assassins," but "On the Trail of the Assassins." And it doesn't simply list the "facts" of the case; it places the facts in the context of a larger (and largely speculative) assassination narrative. In sophistic terms, Garrison reformulates the Warren Commission's "truth" by adopting the role of the storyteller on two levels: he tells the story of his battle to tell his story, and he tells the story of his version of the assassination. The first storytelling role represents the success of this particular book; the second represents the potential success of this and any other assassination theory.

As mentioned earlier, Garrison portrays himself as a dutiful patriot—at first. As the book progresses, he also portrays himself as a single voice fighting against the powerful machinery of the US government. In the 1960s he was largely ridiculed for such posturing, but in the post-Watergate world he finds a more receptive audience for this kind of *ethos*. People today *are* more willing to accept the possibility of governmental coverups. Garrison's struggle is not unlike that of Watergate's Woodward and Bernstein: he tracks down leads, interviews people, puts the pieces of the puzzle together. The leads begin to point to one vast entity—the government. And of course the government is a good target in the post-Watergate world. What is most interesting here is how he involves the reader in the "narrative" of his search for the puzzle pieces: the book begins with the assassination itself, told through the eyes of a concerned but uninvolved New Orleans D.A. who reluctantly begins to pursue the case because of the suspected killer's New Orleans connections. The book culminates in the Clay Shaw trial and its aftermath. We are invited into Garrison's life, and we follow his relationship to the Kennedy case over a period of about eight years. Since he is the "protagonist" of the story, we as readers are likely to "want" his puzzle to be the one that triumphs. And when he loses, when he's ridiculed and castigated for the very *ethos* he's tried to establish in this book, we feel sorry for him. The narrative structure itself is persuasive; it induces agreement in the audience. As readers, we want the hero of the story to be right.

So Garrison persuades his readers in part simply by rendering his own investigation in narrative form. Oliver Stone adopts the same strategy in *JFK*, a film which focuses on Garrison's struggle to discover and prosecute the real criminals. This level of narrative is not enough, however. Ultimately, anyone who picks up a book or views a film about the Kennedy assassination wants to know the answer to one question: "What happened on and around November 22, 1963?" And as both Garrison and Stone realize, the most effective way to answer that question is *not* to list facts and offer a reasoned interpretation of those facts; rather, it is to offer a credible narrative, or in film terminology, a drama, that *includes* the events of November 22. As historian Robert A. Rosenstone points out, "drama" is different from "history," at least as "history" is traditionally conceived, in that "historical events rarely occur with the kind of shape, order, and intensity that will keep an audience in its seats" (508). This recalls Hayden White's statement about the "formal coherency that only stories possess" (19). On some level, every Kennedy-assassination book portrays the events of November 22 in a way designed to persuade as narrative. Even those who decry Garrison's dramatizing of the assassination understand this simple truth: Anthony Summers, for example, prefaces the 1991 edition of his book condemning Garrison and Stone, as well as publishers and moviemakers in general, for "preferr[ing] historical fiction to nonfiction, filmed drama to documentary." "Facts," he laments, "are less profitable than sensational fable." And yet his book opens with a "Cast of Main Characters" (xxv), and he refers to the book itself as "this story" (27). Ultimately, the story itself is only partially dependent on "facts." In an important sense, the success of any assassination theory depends on its success as narrative.

The Warren Commission Report begins with an eighteen-page "Narrative of Events" that opens on the morning of November 22 and concludes with Jack Ruby's murder of Oswald on November 24. Although the narrative focuses on these three days, it does include a six-page account of Oswald's life up to the time of the assassination. Here is a summary of the Warren Commission "story" of the assassination: Lee Harvey Oswald, a troubled high school dropout, joins the Marines, reads Marxist philosophy, then uses what he has learned about the U2 spy

plane program to attract the Soviets as he defects to the USSR in October 1959. He lives in the USSR until June 1962, then returns (with a Russian wife and a baby) after becoming disaffected with the Soviet lifestyle. He then becomes obsessed with America's policies against Cuba, and speaks out against these policies on the streets and on the radio in New Orleans. He orders a cheap rifle through the mail, has his wife take pictures of him holding up the rifle and a couple of Marxist publications. In May of 1963 he takes potshots at a well-known anti-Castro right-wing American military officer, and then in October he begins working at the Texas School Book Depository, where President Kennedy happens to pass in a motorcade on November 22. Oswald fires 3 bullets in about 6 seconds, hitting Kennedy in the back of the neck, then missing, then hitting Kennedy in the back of the head. After the shooting he stashes his rifle among the boxes, rushes downstairs and slips out the front door amid the confusion. He takes a bus and a taxi to his apartment, changes clothes and grabs a pistol, then when he is stopped and questioned along a neighborhood street, he shoots and kills a Dallas police officer. As the police begin to storm into the area, Oswald sneaks into a movie theater, where he is arrested. Two days later he is shot and killed by Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner who can't stand the thought of Mrs. Kennedy going through the trauma of a trial.

Here is a summary of the Garrison "story" of the assassination: Oswald, a young man from a lower-class military family, follows his brother into the Marines and, while stationed in Japan, is approached about intelligence work. He paradoxically studies Russian and Marxism while working with classified information about the U2 radar system. Several weeks after being discharged he "defects" to the Soviet Union—flying from England to Poland in a military plane, making a show of denouncing his citizenship but never actually doing so. In the Soviet Union he is treated well but with great care; the Soviets are suspicious—after all, as many as a dozen other "defectors" had already been returned to the United States as spies. After almost three years in the USSR, Oswald returns to western Europe, where the US consulate lends him money for plane fare home. Back in the US, Oswald's citizenship is fully restored and, at least officially, he is pretty much ignored—unusual for a returned defector. Unoffically, however, he begins to work

in New Orleans under Guy Banister, a CIA agent who oversees the supplying and training of anti-Castro Cubans in Louisiana. Oswald uses his knowledge of Russian and his status as a defector to pose as a Marxist in the one-man "Fair Play for Cuba Committee," which shares a headquarters with Banister's right-wing activist office. He gets into a "staged" scuffle while handing out leaflets (and appears in news reports as a result), and even talks on a radio show as a pro-Castro Marxist. Meanwhile, he also has an FBI contact, and is working under him as an informant. Oswald thinks he is doing counter-intelligence of some kind, that he might infiltrate the pro-Castro supporters in the United States or Mexico. But in fact he is being groomed for future use as a fall guy for some kind of fringe-CIA covert operation—which turns out to be the killing of John F. Kennedy.

In the Fall of 1963 Oswald is instructed to move to Dallas where he is immediately welcomed by the White Russian community, including several CIA or former CIA agents. He may know something about plans to kill Kennedy, but on the day of the assassination his own role is minor. In fact, during the shooting he is on the 2nd floor of the Depository having lunch. The assassination scene has been carefully prepared by powers greater than Oswald: telexed warnings to the FBI have been ignored; the windows and roofs of downtown buildings haven't been secured, as is routine; and the parade route has been changed at the last minute so it will pass by the Depository and make a turn greater than 90 degrees, which is against Secret Service policy. While Oswald is having lunch, the real assassins are stationed on the 6th floor, behind the fence on the grassy knoll, and perhaps on top of the Dal-Tex building as well. Although several suspects are apprehended after the shooting, no police records exist of any official interrograions or processing. It's not clear what Oswald did after the shooting, but nitrate tests that indicate he did not fire a weapon and his poor marksmanship record in the Marines along with the fact that the rifle found on the 6th floor was inaccurate and of very poor quality all suggest that he didn't shoot Kennedy *or* Officer Tippit. Eyewitnesses believe that two men in a car shot Tippit, and the bullets found in Tippit's body didn't match the cartridges found at the scene *or* the pistol Oswald was carrying when he was arrested. Oswald, realizing that he is in

danger—either from the police or from the conspirators themselves—ducks into a movie theater and is arrested. Under interrogation, Oswald maintains his innocence and no record whatever is made of the questions or his responses. Later, Jack Ruby, an underworld figure connected by his Chicago background to several other suspected conspirators, makes his way unhindered into the Dallas police station and kills Oswald before he can "talk." Finally, Kennedy's autopsy is controlled by the military and seriously contradicts the observations of doctors in Dallas who attended Kennedy's wounds. The "lone assassin" theory is carefully supported by the forged autopsy.

The Warren Commission version is relatively simple; the Garrison version is rather complex. The Warren Commission version depends on a single crazy person; the Garrison version depends on dozens of conspirators. The Warren Commission version is "official"; the Garrison version is a "conspiracy theory." And, right or wrong, reasonable or fantastic, the Garrison version—or one close to it—is preferred by roughly three-quarters of all Americans. As *story*, it seems to work.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ASSASSINS AS MYTH-MAKING

Jarratt identifies *nomos* as an alternative "appeal" to the central Aristotelian appeal of *logos*. *Nomos* is broadly defined by Jarratt as a rhetorical appeal, "a self-conscious arrangement of discourse to create politically and socially significant knowledge" (60). Garrison's book is such an arrangement. Taking advantage of twenty-five years of cultural change, he reformulates the assassination "story" from the historical vantage point of 1988.

He is able to reformulate the assassination because his post-Watergate, post-Iran/Contra 1988 audience is particularly susceptible to a cultural mythology *other than* the instrumental mythology so firmly pushed by nonconspiracists. Still, Garrison makes effective use of this instrumentalist mythology, but rather than portray Oswald as "antihero," he portrays *himself* as "hero" and Oswald and the American public as victims of structural forces. The new cultural mythology, or *nomos*, that Garrison appeals to has to do with the secret power of conspiratorial

structural forces. He is, in effect, doing exactly what nonconspirators accuse conspirators like Garrison of doing: he is appealing to the psychological make-up of his audience, which in this case includes the belief that government is *not* what it seems to be. Through the sophistic lens suggested by Susan Jarratt, however, this kind of appeal is not perceived as a weakness. It is the sign of a self-conscious "user" of history stitching together parts to construct a past that is "culturally meaningful and instructive" to the present (16).

Garrison's book, then, does not present a better case than other theories about the assassination. It doesn't present particularly unique or conclusive facts. It doesn't have to. It combines the expected surface-features of traditional Aristotelian argument with an overall narrative structure that itself features a narrative version of the historical events it proposes to uncover. If Jarratt is right about historiography, and the success of Garrison's book suggests that she may be, then the final word on the Kennedy assassination may well come not in the form of a new piece of evidence or overlooked document, but in the form of some future narrative that appeals in special ways to some future cultural audience. And the way the polls are going, it certainly looks as if that future cultural audience will be most likely to accept a *conspiracy* narrative.

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